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ABSTRACT

The emergence of uniform standards for foreign language learning at the elementary and secondary level will soon substantially affect the teaching and learning of foreign languages at the post-secondary level. This groundswell for some sort of standard pre-dates the establishment of the standards themselves. It has become common for students who have years of foreign language coursework in high school to still have to begin in college at the introductory level. There is growing pressure for high schools and colleges to cooperate in order to place some students directly into intermediate or higher level university courses directly from high school. Rather than resist the standards movement that has been so widely embraced for pre-college level education, it is better by far to consider why the standards have struck such a responsive chord among K-12 educators and parents, and to work with these people to interweave the curricula at all levels in ways that make sense for the diverse body of students. Conflicts between the sensibilities of the "proficiency" people in the K-12 community and the "literary" people at the university level need to be addressed, as well as the concerns about grammar that university level instructors have about entering college students. The root of the problem is that the university curriculum has not changed, remaining relatively literature-focused and academic, while the pre-college method of instruction has become much more practice and activity oriented. The two need to come closer together and accept the links between these different but complementary approaches. (KFT)

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The Impact on Higher Education of Standards for Foreign Language Learning: Preparing for the 21st Century

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The publication of Standards for Foreign Language Learning signals the end of business as usual in departments of national languages and literature in our colleges and universities—not so much because of the content of the document per se—but because this content has grown out of a grass-roots desire for change in the foreign language teaching profession across the country. Several state standards projects begun before the national Standards came out had a great deal in common with them (Sandrock). Seventeen states have already modeled their own standards closely on the document, six others have created related standards, and other states are moving in this direction. A 1997 national survey on the impact of the Standards on elementary and secondary school curricula showed that in many cases these already "embodied standards-like principles prior to the development of the actual standards" (Salomon, 6). A generation of enthusiasts was well into the process of trying to change the goals and outcomes of foreign language teaching before the national Standards saw the published light-of-day. While large numbers of university professors of language and literature were paying little if any attention to what was going on, a relative consensus was emerging among the leaders in the pre-college sphere. The groundswell of enthusiasm for change at those earlier levels of the system was not allowed to dissipate, flow off in numerous different directions and weaken itself. It was effectively channeled into a document that sustains the force of the groundswell by allowing a good deal of regional and local latitude for curriculum development and assessment while clearly setting out popular, overall directions for foreign language learning as a whole. When the groundswell fully hits the postsecondary level, it will rock the boat.

University foreign language and literature departments are often shaken into awareness by questions surrounding placement examinations. Administrators are increasingly dubious about the need for numerous sections of beginning college courses in languages commonly taught in high school. They call for tests that will bring down these numbers and place students in higher level courses. Why, they wonder, is enrollment in upper level courses so small and enrollment in lower level courses so big? Foreign language chairs have to face up to such questions. They experiment with various placement tests that are easily accessible, often grammar-based, discrete-point, multiple-choice tests, perhaps computerized, efficient and cost-effective. The result? More students than ever place in F.L.101. "What is going on in the high schools?" the chairs ask angrily. At that point, as their own boat rocks, they come to the belated conclusion that they had better find out what is going on in the high schools. Perhaps they take a look at the Standards. In the worst case scenario, they say, "There you have it. No grammar. No wonder we have to place them in 101." In the best case, they sit down and seriously compare curricula with high school teachers and come up with a test that will place students higher. But, lo and behold, this action goes beyond placement: The college curriculum itself has to change. There is indignation in the colleges at the thought that pre-college standards might drive the college curriculum. Consider the reluctance of many colleagues to think in terms of a "K-16" curriculum. The college years, they feel deeply, are not just a continuation of high school. They are something else. This sense of separateness has helped to perpetuate for far too long the foolish phenomenon of American students repeating the same two beginning years of a language at various levels of the educational system instead of building on what they have learned and moving on. It has been all too easy for universities to fill large beginning classes with students who already began once before, and to blame the high schools for not teaching them properly the first time. This will not be so easy now, as colleagues at the elementary and secondary levels strengthen their own voice and sense of professionalism through having a real plan of action. There are already models for genuine cooperation on high school/university articulation plans—but most of us have a long road to travel before we reach the goal of a multi-year seamless language-learning continuum that includes the college level. To set out on this road, we need first to recognize that what Paul Sandrock has stated about K-12 applies equally to K-16: "Curriculum really bubbles up: it does not get directed from the highest level down"(5). This is not a statement of an ideal; it is a practical description of the way things work when curriculum is based, as Sandrock says, on the reality of what students actually achieve. At the recent conference on articulation sponsored by the Modern Language Association, when Claire Kramsch argued that we needed to establish some continuity and coherence to gain the trust of our students who want to see the payoff

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for their efforts, she was giving voice to a national sentiment; she proceeded, however, to argue that "the only way to do this is to build the curriculum not piece by piece from the bottom up, but from the top down. Keep your eye on the prize, get the faculty to agree on the final goal, and shape each stage according to this final goal."[1]

She was here giving voice to a sentiment that is widespread at the university level but flies flat in the face of national reality. It is too late to try to build a new curriculum in foreign languages from the top down: the top is too split and unsure of what it wants, and the bottom increasingly knows what it is doing and why. Dale Lange has argued that if postsecondary language departments and programs do not take the Standards seriously,"a tragic step will take place in the evolution of second language programs at all levels" (40). He is not exaggerating. Either we look seriously at the curriculum "bubbling up" from the lower levels in the system, and consider how to work with it, or we continue blithely and on the whole blindly to set roadblocks in its way and in the way of the students who bubble up with it.

Better by far to consider why the Standards have struck such a responsive chord among our colleagues at other levels of the system, and to work with these colleagues at interweaving the curricula of all the levels into a variety of courses of study that will make sense in various ways for the hugely variegated mass of American students. There are many individuals and many groups at our colleges and universities whose goals in foreign language teaching can well be subsumed under the flexible and broad definitions of the Standards: They include professors who have worked on various languages-across-the-curriculum projects; those working in cultural studies; area studies; interdisciplinary studies; those who have worked at the colleges since the early eighties on proficiency-oriented language-teaching; on communicative or student-centered language-teaching.

Aspects of the Standards can appeal in fact to teachers of literature as well as to teachers of language. It might be argued indeed that there is something for everyone in the document, and that it does not give a very precise definition to anything, neither to the content of curriculum nor to the mastery of skills. Certainly it lacks any insistence that one content area, one particular kind of subject matter, should have precedence over another and this disturbs in particular the literary scholars, long used to seeing their particular field as pre-eminent in foreign language programs. It also lacks a workable system of readily assessable proficiency levels in the separate skill areas of speaking, reading, writing and listening, and this disturbs those practitioners who have become accustomed to the generally serviceable yardstick provided by the ACTFL Guidelines.

The gap in mutual understanding that marks language and literature departments at the college level is reflected in the way critics of the Standards in the literary segment of the profession tend simplistically to view the document as a product of the "proficiency people." Such critics have no notion of the problems that the document might present to the "proficiency people" themselves. All this shows that, while individual professors may buy in to the Standards in various ways, the universities have a long way to go before they can hope to contribute coherent components to the K-16 curriculum.

Yet try we must to move towards this if we are to avoid taking the "tragic step" of thwarting the aspirations of students coming to us from the secondary schools, of failing to build on the efforts of our finest colleagues at the pre-college levels, and of cutting off the best and biggest source of students for our own programs. Some state-wide and local collaboratives are already hard at work on articulation projects in which participants from the various levels of the system are working as "equal partners with an equal voice and an equal stake" (Birckbichler, 45). A great many individual colleges and universities, however, are not involved in any collaboratives at all. Over the next decade, students will be coming from schools in which they have been taught a foreign language along at least some of the lines that the Standards advocate into departments and programs that have never heard of the 5 Cs. Are these 5 Cs just a gimmick, as some people are inclined to think? It is easy to mock the Madison Avenue alliterative-advertising approach, and ask what would have happened to the 5 Cs if communication or culture had begun with another letter of the alphabet. The alliterative approach is, of course, a gimmick. The multi-purpose Standards document is not only a serious attempt at educational reform—it is also an advertisement for the foreign language enterprise and it has to reach an audience wider than that of professors of language and literature, an audience too bored and disillusioned by its own experiences of school and college foreign language learning to want to read a Standards document that reminds them of these experiences.

The readers of this document do not see tired students reciting paradigms and learning vocabulary lists. They see happy campers communicating about butterflies, chocolate, dinosaurs, hockey and any number of amusing things. They see competent and responsible youngsters engaging in community projects, making speeches, acting in plays, making videos, communicating with the world on the Internet. The document conveys a direct message: Foreign languages are fun, they are useful, they are exciting, you can speak them, write them, read them, understand them; you want to learn them, you want your children to learn them; you don't want to be shut out from the new global society, and you don't want your children to be shut out. And this is only the document! It turns out that your children actually enjoy Ms. Bauer's first year Latin class on the Roman family; they enjoy corresponding by E-mail with "keypals" in Dakar in Monsieur Joseph's seventh grade French class; they enjoy planning a Chinese New Year's celebration in their second year Chinese class; they enjoy the clean-up of the old Spanish cemetery near their school, along with their Spanish teacher, their art teacher, and their history teacher; they enjoy the interviews of local community members that go with it. And they do not at all enjoy getting to college and finding themselves sitting in one-

dimensional foreign language classes, working through half a textbook in 101, and the other half in 102, or sitting in advanced courses talking about literature in English, or struggling hopelessly with literary criticism in a foreign language.

Disappointment with college courses is increasingly being reported back to high school teachers by students who have had their high hopes dashed. The five Cs may sound like a gimmick, but if students really communicate, really compare, really make practical connections with other cultures and other disciplines, really participate in multilingual communities, then the gimmick turns out to be not just an advertisement, but a motivator of teachers and students that can in no way be equaled by the "cover the textbook" approach, so easy to coordinate in basic college foreign language courses, and so difficult to turn into a successful life-long learning process.

The emerging hard truth is that unless we change our way of going about things at the colleges, the main impact the Standards will have on higher education is that fewer and fewer students who have learned languages in elementary and secondary schools will want to take courses in our departments when they come to college. Beyond the ones required, they will find other ways of keeping up their languages. Or else our college administrators will find ways of offering them language instruction other than our own. Instead of worrying patronizingly about whether Standards-educated students will be adequately prepared to take our college-level courses, we would be better advised for own sakes to worry about how to prepare ourselves to teach Standards-educated students. How will we recognize, assess and build on the skills and knowledge that they have acquired? How will we ourselves offer such skills and knowledge in our own programs of languages that are not offered at the pre-college level. Our first step must be to take these skills and this knowledge seriously, and not assume arrogantly, as many of us do, that creating courses and programs for Standards-educated students is a code-expression for lowering college standards.

Since the Standards are identified with "proficiency," and since many of our colleagues mistakenly identify the word "proficiency" with an emphasis on speaking at the expense of reading and writing, they assume that they will be teaching students who cannot read and write and who don't know grammar. If we are to avoid Lange's "tragic step," we at the colleges have to give up knee-jerk responses to words we have never bothered to understand. And at all levels of the system, we have to clarify much more precisely the rigor of a genuinely proficiency-based foreign language program. Such a program can be great fun for students, but the fun is not an end in itself. Its justification lies in its usefulness to their real lives, lives of work as well as lives of leisure and self-enrichment. Such a program certainly does not eliminate grammar from its teaching nor de-emphasize reading and writing. It does, however, test mastery of grammar and performance of skills in a way that is different from standardized testing, and this is why the placement test often acts as a useful catalyst in belated postsecondary attempts to cooperate with the secondary level. The whole question of grammar is a touchy subject that people try to avoid, but I fear that we have to bite the bullet on it and on its role in the Standards if we are to bring opponents and adherents of the document closer together.

The people who say disparagingly, "There's no grammar in it," are not right; but one sees why they say it. There are a number of references in the document to "the need to know how the language system operates" but the only place where the word "grammar" is itself center stage is in the "frequently asked questions" section at the end. There, the question that bothers many people is directly put: "What is the role of grammar?" In their answer to this question, the authors stress their efforts to change the emphasis from memorization of words and grammar rules to the exploration, development and use of "communicative strategies, learning strategies and critical thinking skills as well as the appropriate elements of the language system and culture" (97). The document is intended as a corrective to past practices, where teachers were tied hand and foot to the grammar book. The authors seek to set them and their students free.

Thus while they state quite explicitly in their introduction to the Communication Goal that "knowledge of the linguistic system, its grammar, emerging vocabulary, phonology, pragmatic and discourse features, undergirds the accuracy of communication" (38), nowhere in the Sample Progress Indicators for the three communication standards at the three selected grade levels is there any mention of grammar, though there are plenty of reading and writing Indicators. The authors situate knowledge of grammar under Goal 4, the goal of making comparisons between the native and the foreign language—here the students' attention is focussed on the nature of linguistic systems. The five goals, however, are not intended to be approached separately in the classroom (this is clear from the Learning Scenarios), but are to be seen as parts of an interconnected whole; the success of the Standards will largely rest on the interconnections which are worked out in the process of curriculum development. The colleges need to understand that the Standards quite expressly do not prescribe curriculum. The framers of curriculum and of assessment tools are the ones who will have to deal, among other things, with the indisputable fact that while indeed it is fascinating, useful, and even fun, to compare grammatical systems, it is also absolutely unavoidable in the act of communication itself to use grammar, whether good, bad, or indifferent grammar. It is pleasant to be able to use it easily and without anxiety, and, as we who have worked with the OPI for years know only too well, the more complex the act of communication is, the more crucial it becomes to use grammar correctly. Various language groups are creating language-specific Standards based on the generic ones, and, as one might expect, the classicists do bite the grammar bullet. They place knowledge of the linguistic structure of Latin or Greek under the analytic Goal 4, but equally firmly place demonstra-

tion of that knowledge under the communicative Goal 1, where under Standard 1.1, sample progress indicators at each of the three grade levels include: "Students demonstrate knowledge of vocabulary, basic inflectional systems, and syntax appropriate to their reading level" (7 f.). A line of this kind could well be inserted under the communication goals for other languages. It behooves those college professors who feel strongly on the matter to involve themselves in the ongoing discussions of curriculum frameworks, and not to complain later that they were not consulted.

I have dwelt on the question of grammar here because I know that it is a major preoccupation at the college level. It is a great pity, given the wide-ranging disciplinary competence available at the colleges, that the Cs of the Standards standing for cultures, connections and communities, are not a greater preoccupation in college-level language programs. Language Across the Curriculum programs that have been developed in the colleges in recent years have brought new students into the foreign language classroom, students who would not have enrolled in a traditional language class but who want to pursue the use of a language—sometimes a language learned at high school, sometimes a heritage language—in connection with other fields of study and work. Such programs often find themselves working against rather than with the mainstream of foreign language instruction in the colleges. The Standards aim to break down barriers between languages and other disciplines from the very beginning, but the authors of the document admit that an integrated curriculum with learning opportunities for students around a common theme is more easily accomplished in the elementary school setting than at the middle and high school levels (69). And as Lange points out, the curricular work being done around the Standards in ongoing articulation projects is not showing much evidence of being interdisciplinary or multi-disciplinary, nor does he see "evidence of work-related curriculum development or articulation with employment issues " (38). Here is an area of endeavor ripe for collaboration between high school and college faculty in relatively uncharted territory. I began this piece with the suggestion that it was the placement test that would wake up the colleges to the need to look outside their own bailiwicks at what was going around them, and I will return to this now in my conclusion because I believe that Lange's "tragic step" is already being signaled precisely at the placement point in some states. In Wisconsin an alarm bell is already sounding. A new competency-based admission process has been worked out to "provide high schools with an option to select the process that is better suited to their curricular structure."[2] Students demonstrate appropriate levels of performance on a set of defined academic competencies; there are five levels (roughly equivalent to the familiar three levels of the FSI scale) and each is further categorized under Breadth, Depth and Accuracy. Clearly this system will arouse the curiosity of all of us who have worked on proficiency-oriented programs, whether at the pre-college or the college level. Based on pilot studies, this system of competency rating has been approved by the University of Wisconsin Board of Regents. But—and here comes the alarm bell—in the words of Paul Sandrock: The competency ratings tentatively show high correlation with traditional admissions practices, but have yet to be linked to university language course placement. University departments need to adopt the competencies as their goals for early levels of instruction. Then the system would truly be seamless, with compatible assessment helping students make the transition. Articulation would clearly be in place. As the Competency-Based Admission process moves from piloting to wide-scale usage, this potential remains an unfulfilled promise."[3]

Sandrock summarized the problem in one sentence at the recent MLA conference on articulation: "The University curriculum has not changed." And there we have it. We can develop new curricula and new ways of teaching at the pre-college level, we can even develop ways of testing that are suitable for the new curricular structures and that satisfy university entrance standards, but if these ways of testing cannot be used for placement in the college curriculum, then the potential for a seamless system of articulation across levels will remain unfulfilled. The national Standards provide a vision of long coordinated sequences of language study, of interactive, interdisciplinary language programs, of programs to take heritage learners as well as learners of second languages to a high level of literacy. Such a vision, if realized, will finally raise foreign language teaching at the colleges to a genuine "college-level." The Standards, as has often been said, provide a destination rather than a road-map. As yet there are practically no twelve-year language sequences, but road-maps are being created all over the country for pieces of such sequences. The necessary multiple entry and exit points in the envisioned curriculum are being devised. We at the colleges need, with some humility, to inform ourselves about what is going on, and become a part of it. We need to learn from our placement problems alone that there is a "complex web of connections among curriculum, instruction and assessment" (Liskin-Gasparro, 170) which we can no longer slough off as something that concerns someone else. It concerns us.

NOTES

[1] Unpublished Comments on Articulation for: "High School to College in Foreign Language Programs," a conference sponsored by the Modern Language Association, 6-8 February 1998.

[2]Quotations and information are taken from a handout distributed at the MLA Conference "From High School to College in Foreign Language Programs, 6-8 February, 1998. The source given was University of Wisconsin System/ Office of Academic Affairs, January 1998.

[3]Unpublished Comments on Articulation, as above. Contribution by Paul Sandrock.

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